DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 377 CS 510 158

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TITLE Using Readers' Theatre in the Classroom.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acting; *Creative Dramatics; *Creative Expressi ;; Critical Reading; Elementary Secondary Education; Experiential Learning; *Improvisation; Oral Interpretation; *Reader Text Relationship; *Readers Theater; *Reading Comprehension
IDENTIFIERS Dramatic Improvisational Behavior; Reading Uses

ABSTRACT

Reader's Theatre can be used to combine basic literature and writing instruction with creative arts. Improvisational playmaking by students, using literature in the form of plays, prose, and poetry, forms the basis of Reader's Theatre. Use of Reader's Theatre in the classroom can: (1) foster deeper understanding of character, setting, and plot through the reading, interpretation, and experience of dramatic performance; (2) create deeper understanding of content and a sense of identity and personal validation by making students responsible for their own learning; and (3) encourage better interpersonal interaction through the body language, voice control, and empathy inherent in the group acting experience. Results suggest that the program develops classroom energy and student/teacher motivation by engaging children in holistic involvement with literature and encouraging students to discover, ask questions, role play, and thus achieve a sense of belonging. (EF)

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I. Using Readers' Theatre in the Classroom

by Lorie A. Annarella

Frequently teachers complain that there is so much curriculum to cover that the "fun" things (many times creative arts) can't be taught because of the need for teaching the basics—Reading, Writing and Math. Yet, these basics can be taught quite effectively through the use of creative arts in the classroom. I have always purported the use of creative drama methodology in the classroom. I believe there is no better way to teach curriculum goals and subject content than through the many techniques that creative drama has to offer. One way to bridge the gap between core subjects and the arts is by using Reader's Theatre in the classroom. Having students perform a piece of literature as a classroom drama which entails the reading, editing, working and interpretation of script and helping children to develop characters, can provide a resourceful way for students to learn.

A. What is Readers Theatre

Reader's Theatre is a student focused activity in which students use literature to develop a group enactment and interpretation as a way to focus on the meaning of literature. "Literature becomes a living experience...both for the readers and for their audience"

(Coger & White, in Cottrell, 1987. p. 164). In Reader's Theatre the text or literature, is the script that the students will read and edit. Students are divided into cooperative learning groups (ensemble) consisting of 4 to 6 people, who will in turn perform a literature piece for the class which becomes the audience. There is most often a narrator who may or may not participate as a player in the enactment. Players can mime or speak to show action, as the action in the presentation can occur both on and off the classroom playing area. Lines can be read (not memorized) as the students develop and interpret their roles as characters in the play. The limited use of costumes and props makes it easier for students to participate as players because there is less preparation time. Improvisational playmaking by students using literature as script forms the basis of Reader's Theatre. Students will be asked to read, edit, interpret and perform. Afterwards, there will be a debriefing process where all of the players and the audience which consists of the class, will discuss the text, and the interpretation of the group performance. Items that can be debriefed might be : author's intent, kinds of characters, emotions and feelings of the characters, type of plot and setting, point of view.

B. Literature / Script

Many types of literature can be used as a script for Reader's Theatre. Although the literary piece to be presented by the students can be written in play form, poetry and prose can also be a form of literature used. In a language arts classroom, for instance, the literature that is to be covered in the curriculum can easily be used. Thus, the textbook becomes the script for the performance. Let us see how a Reader's Theatre can teach literature concepts as well as provide a healthful dose of theatre and drama in the everyday class.

1. Things to be Learned

There is a multi-level of learning that goes on during the process of Reader's Theatre. When students are involved in a performance, they are reading, interpreting and experiencing what the author is saying. Through role play they are enacting the characters and situation and consequently, they are becoming one with the characters in the story. This type on enactment leads the students to a deeper level of understanding of the characters in their time, setting and situation.

Since Reader's Theatre is a student focused activity, in which students perform the literature, they become responsible for their

own learning. They are permitted to discover what the author is saying through their own level of interpretation. This helps them to develop a better understanding of what the literature is about. Just as children enjoy watching plays because it can give them a sense of self-identification and validation of their role in life, performance can clarify "for the child the ramifications of the story and opens the way for his mind to leap ahead of the players in a stimulating shared experience, where, himself anonymous...the other world walled out, s/he focuses on characters caught in situations which require decisions and value judgments"(Henry, 1967, p.9).

As performers they are learning the responsibility of being there for their fellow performers. They also learn that ensemble (or small group) is important as well as whole group. Playing off another character through gesture and dialogue teaches them to focus and to read body language, and relegates the correct use of the voice through oral interpretation. Students can learn abstract concepts in experiential ways by role-playing a character and seeing through the character's eyes and feeling the characters emotions. This can teach the student empathy and understanding for others. "Rather than discuss how characters could solve a

problem, for example, the teacher and students experience finding their own solution to the same problem" (Flynn, & Carr, 1994, p. 38).

C. Energy in the Classroom

Introducing children to Reader's Theatre in the classroom setting can give a richness and energy to the quality of teaching. The teacher can become energized as well as the students. Because there is total student involvement through the performance of the literature, students can become engaged and develop a feeling of investment in the lesson. This is very energizing for the student, because s/he is not only reading an assignment, but performing the assignment, through interpretation of the characters. It is also energizing for the teacher to watch students as they read, interpret and perform literature, knowing that these students are holistically involved in the process of Reader's Theatre and the process of learning. Students can't help but become energized when they are experientially involved in performing a piece of literature. They can discover that the same problems and situations for the characters in the literature, can also be similar to their real life situations and problems. In Reader's Theatre students become not

only engaged as an audience, but also as a performers. They learn from both aspects of theatre arts. It is up to the teacher to facilitate how they become engaged in an organized way so that they can express themselves through the drama of Reader's Theatre. It is important that each student become involved in a nonjudgmental way within the group performance. The idea for Reader's Theatre is to have students ask questions of the characters and situations in which they are playing and to try to discover some of the answers. Each contribution that the students makes becomes an important value judgment and is to be respected as such. "When all students are active participants, drama sessions are more productive and less chaotic" (Fllynn & Carr, 1994,p.39). When the entire group is working together the best kind of learning takes place. If the script calls for only several characters, have the students revise it to include more cast members. For instance, if there are three mice in the play, and there are two people in need of parts, make the three mice a chorus of five. There is room for all to participate. Reader's Theatre can help students take a play, poetry or prose selection and turn it into a learning experience.

D. Motivation in the Classroom

One of the primary responsibility of the teacher is to motivate. When students are not interested in what is being taught, they don't learn. To motivate students is to have a student focused curriculum; one in which the student is permitted to discover, ask questions and to progress in an inquiry approach to learning. This can be accomplished through Reader's Theatre. The use of theatre and drama production in the classroom thrives on a high level of involvement. The excitement of having students become involved in Reader's Theatre through acting and dramatic presentation , along with developing scenes and characters can become a motivating element and a valuable tool for learning and self-discovery for the student.

Using Reader's Theatre as a learning methodology can help satisfy "...the need of people to role play in order to measure themselves and their own experiences against those of others, not only to see where they are different, but also to discover how they are alike. In this way people achieve a sense of belonging, especially in those aspects of living which are not communicable by words alone" (Heathcote, 1971, p. 18).

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